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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 000526

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINS](#) [PINR](#) [KDEM](#) [PHUM](#) [BG](#)
SUBJECT: BANGLADESH PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION SET FOR
DECEMBER, BUT ROAD TO DEMOCRACY REMAINS ROCKY

Classified By: Ambassador James F. Moriarty. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

¶11. (C) The Chief Adviser announced in a nationally broadcast speech that Parliamentary elections would take place the third week of December and government dialogue with political parties start May 22. He also announced a relaxation of restrictions on political activity to facilitate campaigning and called for a national charter to improve governance. He did not address the demand of the two major political parties for the release from jail of their two leaders, nor did he promise to lift emergency power rules as called for by senior politicians. There were no surprises in the speech, which included many of the ideas the Chief Adviser had previewed in recent meetings with senior USG officials. Awami League and Bangladesh Nationalist Party officials immediately dismissed the Chief Adviser's speech as insufficient. While the speech was a milestone on the road back to democracy, the parties' negative reaction underscores the difficulties that lie ahead.

CHIEF ADVISER FILLS IN ELECTION ROADMAP DETAILS

¶12. (U) In an address to the nation on 5/12, Chief Adviser Fakhruddin Ahmed set Parliamentary elections for the third week of December, to be preceded by local elections at the municipal and upazilla (county) level. He said some emergency restrictions on political activity in place since the Caretaker Government (CTG) came to power in January 2007 would be lifted on May 13, and other emergency rules would be eased as necessary to allow for campaigning. Fakhruddin announced that the long-awaited dialogue on political reform between the Caretaker Government and political parties would begin on May 22, and he called for a national charter to put in place "a proper and fair electoral framework."

¶13. (SBU) Although he did not specify how the charter would be drafted, the dialogue with political parties would be a likely forum. Throughout his speech he railed against corruption, extreme partisanship and political violence, the scourges of Bangladeshi politics that the national charter would likely proscribe. Fakhruddin also called for a greater balance of political power, presumably a reference to increasing the clout of the now largely ceremonial President as a check on the Prime Minister and to providing a role for the military in a national security council. Both measures are under consideration by the CTG.

POLITICAL PARTY DEMANDS LARGELY IGNORED

14. (C) Fakhruddin did not address demands that the two parties' leaders in jail on corruption charges, Awami League President Sheikh Hasina and BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia, be released and allowed to participate in the election campaigns. He did not announce a timetable for ending emergency rule, which places numerous restrictions on civil liberties. Although Fakhruddin said a ban on so-called "indoor politics" would be lifted May 13, newly gazetted rules suggest such political activity will remain restricted. For example, political meetings will require official approval and be limited to discussions of organizational and election issues. Fakhruddin did promise to suspend or relax other emergency regulations when appropriate "to create a favorable atmosphere for the election and ease the poll campaigns" but provided neither concrete details nor a timetable. (Note: In earlier conversations with Assistant Secretary Boucher and the Ambassador, the Chief Adviser suggested that the lifting of restrictions would be done sequentially and would depend on the parties' reaction to the increasingly permissive atmosphere. End Note.) Fakhruddin did bow to the demands of the parties for separate dialogues with the government rather than a large plenary session.

15. (C) The Chief Adviser announced local upazilla (county) elections would precede Parliamentary elections, arguing they would "create a positive flow toward greater national elections." The Awami League and BNP, however, have argued that upazilla elections should come after formation of the next Parliament. They fear local elections under the Caretaker Government would advantage candidates who owe allegiance to the CTG's military backers and not to the

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political parties. Putting it another way, other observers note that the two big parties would be better able to dominate the local elections once their members are elected to Parliament.

COMMENT: NO CLARITY YET ON THE WAY BACK TO DEMOCRACY

16. (C) Although Fakhruddin Ahmed clarified the timetable for Parliamentary elections, significant obstacles on Bangladesh's road to democracy remain. He did not address perhaps the single most important political issue, the fate of the two ladies. He did not agree to lift emergency rules, which the political parties see as a necessary prerequisite to free, fair and credible elections. And he introduced the concept of a national charter to rid the country of dysfunctional politics, but did not indicate how it would be drafted or approved. Ominously, the Secretary General of the BNP went so far as to question the right of the CTG to propose such a national charter. Indeed, the harsh reaction of the parties to what was a fairly anodyne speech that offered a few olive branches underscored how difficult compromise could prove in the coming months. The parties -- and their two leaders -- appear to believe increasingly that they have the Caretaker Government on the ropes.
Moriarty